

BOOKS



REVIEWED

In contrast with the gloomy tone of much contemporary sf, *Blue Mars* envisages humankind brought, by its own efforts, willingly, to the cusp of a golden age, with fusion-propelled starships heading ever further from the solar system, piloted by men and women who may live to be a thousand years old. Peter F. Hamilton's *The Reality Dysfunction* (Macmillan, £16.99) takes off from there and projects us 300 or so years further ahead to a time when the golden age is in full swing and far-flung corners of the galaxy have been colonized by humans whom genetic engineering has rendered long-lived and physically perfect, god-like if not quite true gods. Biotechnology has made possible quasi-telepathic communication across the gulfs of space, and sentient spaceships ply the space-lanes, empathically linked to their human captains. The distinction between artificial intelligence and the human mind, between inorganic and organic, has become so blurred as to be all but meaningless. Disease is nonexistent, sexual promiscuity is rife, safe and enthusiastically endorsed, and you can drink almost as much as you want to without serious ill-effect.

From the moment *The Reality Dysfunction* begins, it is clear that Hamilton's joy in science-tethered flights of fancy is going to be infectious. The first chapter is pure space opera, all exploding starships and (literally) bone-shattering g-forces. Hurrah! But it is also clear that everything is destined to go Horribly Wrong. After all, as both Hamilton and Robinson are aware, there is nothing intrinsically interesting about a golden age. Perfection is boring to write about. Without conflict, where is the story? The creation or destruction of a golden age, on the other hand, offers meatier material to work with, and once Hamilton gets going dismantling his 26th-century status quo, *The Reality Dysfunction* really takes off. This happens about a third of the way into the book, which means there are 300 pages of scene-setting to get through first. Those 300 pages are vital, since you can't establish several different races and worlds and a huge cast of characters in just a handful of chapters, and they aren't dull – Hamilton knows better than most sf writers that a good, short, sharp shock of action can spice up even the plainest datadump – but they are there and they do have to be ingested and digested before the fireworks can commence.

Principally we are introduced to two main offshoots of the human race, the Adamists and the Edenists (the latter enjoying constant access to a consensual collective consciousness), and to two pivotal characters. The first is Joshua Calvert, who dreams of refitting and flying his father's ship, the

Lady Macbeth, and whose space pilot's instincts are matched only by his arrant precociousness. The other is Ione Saldana, beautiful young empress of the artificial satellite habitat Tranquillity, with whom Joshua has lots of splendidly athletic sex (with Ione, that is, not with the artificial satellite habitat, although in Hamilton's 26th century anything is possible). The queen and the roguish hero are an odd couple as old as Malory, or perhaps as *Star Wars*, but in Hamilton's hands they are no mere cliché; they are more complex than that. Ione is in many ways reminiscent of Julia Evans, the multi-billionaire heiress and philanthropic businesswoman from Hamilton's previous trio of novels, the Greg Mandel books, but her power exceeds even Julia's. Thanks to her mental affinity with Tranquillity, Ione sees and hears everything that goes on within her realm, although this gift is always underplayed and sometimes humorously glossed. Joshua, meanwhile, is the archetypal reluctant hero, inspired to heroic deeds either by self-interest or in spite of his best interests. Space opera has always been about traditions, and Joshua and Ione are perhaps *The Reality Dysfunction*'s only two stereotypes, but for all that Hamilton gives them engaging and credible personalities and handles well the uncertain pitch and yaw of their love affair.

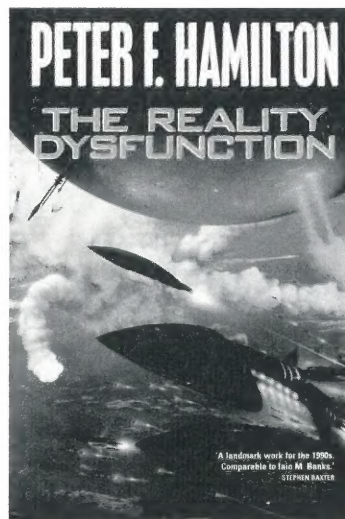
Joshua and Ione are the book's emotional core, its Lancelot and Guinevere, its top-billed stars, but there are several other characters of equal significance and a host of sup-

porting players, far too many to enumerate here. The action centres on a frontier planet, Lalonde, and follows a group of recently arrived colonists as they travel upriver to their new home and, inevitably, towards a heart of darkness. Initially the evil resides in the soul of Quinn Dexter, one of the group of convicts conscripted to serve as the colonists' workhorses, but it soon manifests itself physically in spectacular fashion. What is inadvertently unleashed on Lalonde by a complicated confluence of events is a force which, gradually at first but with increasing rapidity, makes it obvious that not only is the golden age at an end but there is every chance that a new dark age may be imminent. Hence the overall title for the trilogy, *Night's Dawn*.

It is hard to discuss *The Reality Dysfunction* without mentioning its size. At 950-odd pages, it is a behemoth; more accurately, it is one third of a behemoth which, when completed, will run to approximately one million words. Size, as we all know, isn't everything, and 950 pages without real substance and badly written are 950 pages which would better have been left blank or, preferably, as tree. Happily *The Reality Dysfunction* has all the substance Hamilton's mighty imagination can give it. For evidence, look no further than the chapter describing the homeworld of the Ly-cilph, an alien race so bizarre that they simply *must* exist somewhere out there, or to the battle scene in the closing chapters where near-indestructible knights in armour duke it out with armed-to-the-teeth cyborg mercenaries who lob nuclear devices around like hand-grenades. As for the writing, it is as dense and as detailed as we have come to expect from Hamilton, not to mention as gorgeously rich in sesquipedalianism. Indeed, it seems as if Hamilton is on a mission to employ every single word in the English lexicon at least once in this book, and no doubt the few recondite terms he has failed to include this time will turn up over the course of the next two volumes.

The Reality Dysfunction is an epic in the traditional sense of the word – big, brash, sweeping, hyperbolic, exuberant, thunderously enjoyable – the sort of book Tolstoy would have produced had he availed himself of a bucketload of LSD before settling down to write *War and Peace*. As for *Night's Dawn*, if it continues with the grand vistas of the far future, the pyrotechnical prose and the good-against-evil fulcrum of the first volume – and there is no reason to suspect that it won't – then, though a far cry from the cool, analytical intricacies of the *Mars* trilogy, it will amply fill the void Robinson leaves behind.

James Lovegrove



real destination was the nearby campanile, this marble phallus that seemed to excite her even more than the towers of San Gimignano.

I stepped from the taxi and stared up at the dizzying structure with its dangerously canted floors. Without a word, Elaine strode away from me towards the tower. She paid her entrance fee and began to climb the steps behind two uniformed sailors and a father with his daughter. As she reached each tier she looked down at me with her affectionate but knowing smirk, her contempt rising with each successive storey.

I stood on the cathedral steps, still surprised by the steep inclination of the tower, some 17 feet from the vertical. Despite myself, I wished that the structure, tilting each year by a few added millimetres, would decide on this exact moment for its long-predicted collapse.

Then, as Elaine reached the penultimate tier, I found myself needing to touch the tower, to feel the unforgiving marble against my skin. I left the cathedral and walked across the worn grass where the tourists sat in the sun, waving to their friends high above them. Ignoring the ticket office, I strolled around the stone well that surrounded the tower. I placed my hand on the antique marble, its surface pitted with the graffiti of centuries, its veins as marmoreal as fossilized time. The tower was both too erect and too old. I pressed against the massive flank, urging it on its way.

Eight storeys above me, Elaine had reached the roof and stood beside the panting sailors. Scarcely out of breath, she seized the iron rail and smiled down at me in her most implacable way, slowly shaking her head at my weakness.

Angered by her open contempt, I pushed again at the solid marble. The wall refused to yield, but when I lifted my hand I noticed that a small crack had appeared in the surface, running away from a discoloured node of crushed limestone. Curious, I pressed again, only to see that the crack had widened. It inched upwards at a barely visible pace, then darted forward, climbing the wall like a sudden fissure in a sheet of ice. Three feet long, it crossed a decorative moulding and rose swiftly towards the cornice of the first tier.

Laughing at this, I pressed both hands at the marble drum. Immediately the crack accelerated, and I heard a distant rumble, the dark groan of an awakening creature deep within the tower. The crack was now an open fissure through which I could see the shoes of the startled old man resting before he and his wife made their way to the second storey. A fine rain of dust and crumbling mortar showered my face. The entire tower was trembling against my hands, and a section of cornice fell through the air, followed by a

scatter of fragments each larger than my fist.

The Tower of Pisa was about to fall. I gave it one last push, both arms outstretched, and felt the tortured rumbling as somewhere the spine of this great edifice began to crack. I stepped back, aware that the building was about to collapse onto me, and then looked up at the roof, where Elaine was clinging to the iron rail.

The tower buckled, its columns spilling like skittled pins at a bowling alley. In the last moments, as Elaine was pitched over the rail, I saw her face falling towards me, and an expression of anger that unmistakably changed, as she noticed me far below her, to one of triumph.



A second Tower of Pisa is now rising on the site of the first, financed by the world-wide appeal launched soon after the tragedy. The structure, this time mounted on an immovable concrete base, has reached the third storey and already reveals the modest inclination designed into it. This tower, supported by a rigid steel armature, will never fall, and within a few decades most visitors will have forgotten that it is no more than a replica.

For me, though, the original tower remains as real as ever in my mind. I often wake from terrifying dreams as the tons of marble hurtle towards me. Then I remind myself that it was Elaine who died on that day. I remember the expression on

her face, the fierce pride that lit her eyes.

Did she feel that she had at last triumphed over me, and was happy to see me crushed by the cascade of tumbling columns? I remember the stones pelting my shoulders while I tried vainly to step back from the tower. At the last moment, as an amateur video-film reveals, the structure seemed to buckle, twisting itself in a desperate attempt to remain upright. It slewed away from me, sweeping Elaine, the collapsing masonry and the cartwheeling columns towards the ground by the cathedral steps.

I escaped, but that expression of triumph on Elaine's face still puzzles me. Had she seen me pushing against the tower and assumed that I was responsible for its collapse? Was she proud of me for hating her so fiercely, and for at last stirring from my impotence to take my revenge? Perhaps only in her death did we truly come together, and the Tower of Pisa served a purpose for which it had waited for so many centuries.

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J. G. Ballard last appeared in *Interzone* with "The Message from Mars" (issue 58, April 1992). Another story of his, "Report from an Obscure Planet," appeared almost simultaneously in an international magazine called *Leonardo* (April 1992). The above new piece is the first short story he has written since then.